

# a **Depression Lab** guide to recovering from depression: the basics

## 1. why this guide

**Depression Lab** is all about doing the things you need to do to get better. It's about using smart tactics to get started on these things and keep going until the sadness and despair lift. Little by little, one step at a time towards the broad, sunlit uplands of good mental health.

Why is this approach so important? Because depression takes away the motivation and initiative to do anything at all. At its worst, depression even makes physical movement difficult.

It is possible to outwit depression (and in doing so beat it) with a mixture of guile, determination and compassion. Which is where the smart tactics (and **the Depression Lab**) come in. But first things first: understanding the basics of depression.

This guide sets out the basic information and advice you should be aware of when tackling depression.

## **2. what is depression**

According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, most people with depression will have at least five or six of these symptoms<sup>1</sup>. You:

- feel unhappy most of the time (but may feel a little better in the evenings)
- lose interest in life and can't enjoy anything
- find it harder to make decisions
- can't cope with things that you used to
- feel utterly tired
- feel restless and agitated
- lose appetite and weight (some people find they do the reverse and put on weight)
- take 1-2 hours to get off to sleep, and then wake up earlier than usual
- lose interest in sex
- lose your self-confidence
- feel useless, inadequate and hopeless
- avoid other people
- feel irritable

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/depression.aspx>

- feel worse at a particular time each day, usually in the morning
- have thoughts of suicide

It sometimes takes a friend or a partner to spot that there really is a problem, especially if it has come on gradually. It is common to try to struggle on, mistaking the symptoms at first for laziness or lack of willpower.

### **3. types of depression**

The Mental Health Foundation describes several types of depression<sup>2</sup>:

#### **mild depression**

Depression is described as mild when it has a limited negative effect on your daily life. For example, you may have difficulty concentrating at work or motivating yourself to do the things you normally enjoy.

#### **major depression**

Major depression interferes with your daily life - with eating, sleeping and other everyday activities.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/mental-health-a-z/D/depression/>

Some people may experience only one episode but it is more common to experience several episodes in a lifetime. It can lead to hospital admission, if you are so unwell you are at risk of harm to yourself.

### **bi-polar disorder**

The mood swings in bi-polar disorder can be extreme - from highs, where you feel extremely elated and indestructible, to lows, where you may experience complete despair, lethargy and suicidal feelings. Sometimes people have very severe symptoms where they cannot make sense of their world and do things that seem odd or illogical.

### **post-natal depression**

Many new mothers experience what are sometimes called 'baby blues' a few days after the birth. These feelings of anxiety and lack of confidence are very distressing but in most cases last only a couple of weeks.

Post-natal depression is more intense and lasts longer. It can leave new mothers feeling completely overwhelmed, inadequate and unable to cope. You may have problems sleeping, panic attacks or an intense fear of dying. You may also experience negative feelings towards your child. It

affects one in ten mothers and usually begins two to three weeks after the birth.

### **seasonal affective disorder (SAD)**

SAD is associated with the start of winter and can last until spring when longer days bring more daylight. When it is mild (SAD, not the weather), it is sometimes called 'winter blues'. SAD can make you feel anxious, stressed and depressed. It may interfere with your moods and with your sleeping and eating patterns.

## **4. causes of depression**

The causes of depression are a complex mix of biological, psychological and social factors. In other words, there is more than one reason why you might suffer from depression. The Royal College of Psychiatrists puts the main reasons simply, as follows<sup>3</sup>:

### **things that happen**

It is normal to feel depressed after a distressing event - bereavement, a divorce or losing a job. You

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<sup>3</sup>

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfo/problem/s/depression/depression.aspx>

may well spend a lot of time over the next few weeks or months thinking and talking about it. After a while you come to terms with what's happened. But you may get stuck in a depressed mood, which doesn't seem to lift.

### **circumstances**

If you are alone, have no friends around, are stressed, have other worries or are physically run down, you are more likely to become depressed.

### **physical illness**

Physical illnesses can affect the way the brain works and so cause depression. These include:

- life-threatening illnesses like cancer and heart disease
- long and/or painful illnesses, like arthritis
- viral infections like 'flu' or glandular fever - particularly in younger people
- hormonal problems, like an under-active thyroid.

### **personality**

Some of us seem to be more vulnerable to depression than others. This may be because of our genes, because of experiences early in our life, or both.

### **alcohol**

Regular heavy drinking makes you more likely to get depressed. A downward spiral of drinking and depression can be hard extra hard to get out of.

### **gender**

Women seem to get depressed more often than men. It may be that men are less likely to talk about their feelings, and more likely to deal with them by drinking heavily or becoming aggressive. Women are more likely to have the double stress of having to work and look after children.

### **genes**

Depression can run in families. If you have one parent who has become severely depressed, you are about eight times more likely to become depressed yourself.

## **5. treatment for depression**

Depression is treatable – most people will get better. The three most common treatments are:

- medication - antidepressants
- talking therapy - eg cognitive behavioural therapy, counselling, psychotherapy, support

groups. Also, mindfulness therapy for depression is increasingly available through the NHS

- self care – see below

## **self care**

DIY depression-busting is a mixture of things that improve the health of your mind, body, social connections and environment. It is often a matter of trial and error to find the most helpful combination, which might include the following:

### mind

- tackle negative thoughts about yourself
- tackle anxiety and rumination
- learn to cope with stress
- improve problem-solving skills

### body

- exercise
- eat healthily
- avoid alcohol and drugs
- sleep well

### social connections

- get plenty of social contact
- help others

environment

- resolve/avoid stressful situations where possible
- get plenty of daylight
- spend time outside in green spaces

## **6. where to start**

### **get professional help**

NHS advice is to seek help from your GP if you experience symptoms of depression for most of the day, every day for more than two weeks<sup>4</sup>. It is especially important to speak to your GP if you experience:

- symptoms of depression that are not improving
- your mood affects your work, other interests, and relationships with your family and friends
- thoughts of suicide or self-harm

The GP may prescribe anti-depressants and/or refer you to psychological therapy.

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<sup>4</sup>

*TIP:* write down a list of your symptoms before seeing the GP so you don't forget to say something important. Also, you can just hand it over if you start crying and can't talk.

*TIP:* take whatever is offered - pills, CBT, exercise programme, online course - what have you got to lose? Some people are reluctant to take anti-depressants but they may help get you out of a bad spell, and then you can make a more rational judgement on long term use.

Contact the Samaritans if you feel suicidal  
Call 08457 90 90 90 or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) -  
24 hours a day

## **help yourself**

Bear in mind that depression, unlike most illnesses, makes it particularly difficult to do the things that promote recovery (or anything much, for that matter). It usually helps to start really small and build up gradually – setting unrealistic goals and expectations will only make matters worse.

*TIP:* you want to try running but aren't in the habit of regular exercise? Day 1: just get

dressed as if for running. Day 2: put your running kit on, go outside, come back in. Day 3: put your kit on, walk 10 paces from your front door and return. Day 4: as day 3 but further. You get the idea. When you are very depressed, that “Blob to 5k Plan” you saw in Runner’s World needs a bit of modification.

## 7. Finally

So that is the basic information and advice you need to make a start on recovering from depression. Of course, there is much more to know and think about if required. Many great books have been written on the subject, and there is boundless research, guidance and discussion online to explore too.

The main thing is to get started on getting better. You can do it.

If you have found this guide useful, please keep an eye on the **Depression Lab** website (<http://www.depressionlab.com/>) for regular articles and further publications.